

Dialogue

The Study of Women in the Pacific

CAROLINE RALSTON

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LABELS

Not even the title of a piece on women is unproblematic. Choosing the seemingly straight forward term "women" rather than "gender" immediately highlights a number of debates over the last decade that have concerned scholars involved in feminism, women, and gender. My choice of title is, of course, ultimately a personal one. I chose the word I felt most comfortable with, that offered the clearest portrayal of my work and intention. In the past, when invited to convene sessions on women's issues at Pacific History Association conferences, I asked that the sessions be titled *Gender in the Pacific*, not *Women in the Pacific*, because, I argued, it was not possible to analyze the pattern of daily lives and symbolic constitution of women in isolation from men. I wanted to dissociate myself from studies that asked rather simplistic questions about status: women's vis à vis men's. Such a perspective tended to concentrate analysis on the public, jural roles of men and women. Not surprisingly, it emphasized the privileged position of men in almost all societies, while numerous other economic, social, religious, and kinship transactions in which women were vitally involved were ignored or devalued. Since the mid-1970s scholars have increasingly recognized the sterility of this narrow view of status and have sought a variety of theoretical and empirical avenues through which to explore the nature of women's lives. In the process many come to prefer the term "gender studies," with its implications of cultural construction rather than biological determinism, and because of its inclusive nature: masculinity as well as femininity could be explored.

Accepting these arguments I preferred until recently the term "gender studies" to "women's studies" in the vain hope that balanced analyses of women and men in Pacific societies would appear, or that at least a few studies of masculinity would be forthcoming. With the exception of the study of homosexual rites in Melanesia, very little (nothing?) has yet been

done in the area of masculinist studies in the Pacific. The marked androcentric bias of most anthropological and historical works to date, which have been paraded as objective, universalist accounts, must not be confused as studies of masculinity, that is those studies which problematize the meanings and practices of male worlds.

While I still consider balanced gender studies an ideal to aspire to, in my own research I continually find myself having to explain my predominant concern for and focus on women. Presenting the paper "Gender Relations in Tonga at the Time of Contact" to a Tongan history and culture conference in 1987, I felt compelled to preface my analysis with the following justifications: "I am concentrating on women, not because I see the topic as a problem of women, but because it is my particular interest. I do not believe, however, that women can be studied in isolation from men in any cultural context. My central concern is therefore the relations between the sexes, but with the focus on women" (Ralston 1990a).

My personal unease at that time about labeling the nature of my research was not unique. A marked shift in the politics of feminism, both in the wider world and within the cloistered walls of academe, was occurring. The radical, seemingly univocal position of the second-wave white feminists in the early 1970s gave rise to many different feminisms and to the recognition of the multiplicity of women's lives. Within the universities the battle for recognition of feminist or women's studies as a legitimate area of teaching and research evolved in several American tertiary institutions into a fight for gender studies, on the grounds that the latter were more inclusive. They are also less threatening to the fundamental masculinist ethos of the university world, however, and many feminists feared that gender studies would not pose the same intellectual and political challenge that women's or feminist studies would.

For both personal and academic reasons I now want to label my research "women's studies." As a feminist I do not believe that women have found their equal place in any disciplinary framework or context of knowledge. When and if this happens, "gender studies" may be more appropriate, but until then I personally am committed to enlarging our knowledge about women, never without reference to the male world, but always with women as the center of my attention. Clearly, neither "women" nor "gender" has a simple referent or connotation. I chose my title not because I wished to pursue issues of status or women in isolation, but because my work is concerned predominantly with the elucidation of

the meanings and practicalities of women's lives within society. Whether scholars have labeled their research "gender" or "women's" studies, the preponderance of published work in this field, my own included, is concentrated upon women, and I believe it is appropriately called "women's studies."

Although I insist that my focus is on women, throughout this article and in other publications I frequently use both terms, "women" and "gender." I do this because I wish to understand and elucidate the complexities of women's lived experience in as full and integrated a way as possible. A marked tendency to use these terms to label two quite distinct approaches is evident elsewhere in the Pacific field. Sociological accounts use the term "women", symbolic analyses are more likely to use "gender." I will investigate the analytical problems that result from these divergent approaches.

ANTECEDENTS

Because no academic pursuit is value free, I want to acknowledge the personal antecedents to my interest in women's studies in the Pacific. As a PhD scholar doing research in Polynesia in the late 1960s, I was struck by the poise, self-assurance, and personal integrity of many of the Polynesian women I saw, and of those I spoke with. Despite large families, long working hours, and limited access to education, especially at post-secondary levels, these Polynesian women were articulate and seemingly clear about their position in society and the changes they wished to initiate. At that time my own research interests were neatly constrained within the androcentric parameters of Pacific history as it was then taught and written in Australian universities. Issues of women or of gender were not on academic agendas. But later, as I became involved in the feminist movement and considered the barrage of male constraints and influences on my own female past, the images of those confident, self-aware Polynesian women, and of other Pacific women I had met since, returned and aroused my personal and academic fascination. I could be accused of romanticizing the other, but I was not under the illusion that all Polynesian or Pacific Island women possessed the characteristics that so attracted me. Enough did, however, to make me want to know more about the nature of Polynesian women's lives in the present, and about the changes that had occurred in women's lives since contact with the West.

Were the poise and self-assurance that so deeply impressed me the prod-

uct of new ideologies, activities, and responsibilities introduced or developed since contact, or were they the result of values and outlooks that had long-established cultural antecedents which either had remained unchanged or, while modified over the period of contact, still molded present lives? Stripped of personal romanticisms the question can be academically condensed to Have the lives and symbolic valuations of women declined or been enhanced since Western intrusion? It is, of course, a question that is asked about women not only in the Pacific but also throughout the third and fourth worlds. I will discuss some of the different approaches to it in a later section, but it should be recognized at the outset that the question itself is problematic. Its bias is Eurocentric, privileging foreign intrusion, while its focus inhibits investigation of the full diversity of women's lives.

The academic antecedents to the study of women in the Pacific are two-fold. In the region itself they go back at least to the anthropological work of Malinowski (1927, 1929), Mead (1931, 1963[1935]) and Bateson (1936) in the 1920s and 1930s. Since that period both the region of Melanesia and the discipline of anthropology have continued to attract most scholars working on issues of women and gender. As in the Pacific field as a whole, anthropological work on Melanesian women, men, and gender has led to major theoretical debate and the generation of new theories.

Closely associated with the emergence of second-wave feminism in the early 1970s and with the appearance of a growing number of academic treatises on women, the number of female scholars working in the Pacific in a range of humanities and social science disciplines increased markedly. They were concerned with clarifying questions about Pacific Island women. These scholars were influenced by themes central to the feminist movement and the developing academic field of women's studies in Western societies, influences that together constituted the second major antecedent to the study of women in the Pacific.

Over the past decade theories generated by women's studies and imported into the Pacific have been scrutinized rigorously, and several thought originally to have universal salience have been shown to be culturally or class specific. That the binary oppositions of man:culture:public sphere versus woman:nature:domestic sphere had no force in many pre-contact Pacific societies was convincingly argued. These dichotomies are irrelevant in relation to cultural presuppositions, and to the structures and living patterns of small-scale, pre-industrial kinship societies. Although in

the early years of women's studies in the Pacific some theoretical and methodological dependence on Eurocentric feminist models existed, more recently scholars working in Pacific societies have made significant contributions to the field generally.

As a disciplinary group historians were more resistant than anthropologists to the proposition that women and their activities were/are significant. Concerned about public events, about political and military processes, and largely dependent on a written record, many historians found it difficult to pose historical questions about women's lives or to find the necessary data to answer them. Given these circumstances it was not surprising that a scholarly interest in women in Pacific history only became apparent in the late 1970s and that the initial studies focused on white women in the Pacific: missionary workers and wives, and the impact of white women settlers on race relations. Although documentary data on women are nearly always fragmentary and diffuse, more historical material is available on white women in the Pacific than on island women. In time, and as they became more adept at ethnographic and structuralist modes of history, Pacific historians turned their attention to the lives of indigenous women. But the relations between island and white women have yet to be thoroughly investigated. To date work has focused almost exclusively on questions of competitive sexuality and race relations.

The increasingly interdisciplinary approach to the study of women and men in the Pacific participated in by certain historians has been the most intellectually creative and productive development in Pacific women's studies in the 1980s. A number of disciplines have been involved, but for the study of women the interdisciplinary mesh between history and anthropology has proved the most rewarding. Structural history or historical anthropology was pioneered in Pacific studies by Sahlins (1981, 1985) and Denning (1980, 1986), both of whom made insightful, if brief, contributions to the study of gender and women. From these beginnings several anthropologists studying women in the Pacific have turned to manuscript and published sources to elucidate the impact of the Western presence and colonial penetration on Pacific women and men. Historians have similarly turned to anthropological theory and cultural perspectives to better portray the island milieu and Islanders' motivation and agency. The mesh is not without problems, but as scholars trained in one discipline have become more adept in the theory, methodologies, and language of the

other, their work has become increasingly rich, historically sensitive, and culturally embedded.

REPRESENTING WOMEN CROSS-CULTURALLY

The growing body of academic literature on women in the Pacific contains only a handful of articles by Pacific Island women themselves. Few island men educated in Western-style academic institutions have been drawn to the study of their own societies. For a variety of reasons, including direct and systemic discrimination, even fewer women have had the opportunity to study their own societies or their particular position within them. For the women who reach tertiary institutions it is also, of course, a matter of their own priorities. Pacific women's voices were all but silent in the documented record of the past, and for any period prior to 1920 it is virtually impossible to gain oral history from women. One of the earliest and most persistent criticisms from second-wave white feminists was that women were spoken for and written about, when they were considered at all, by men. Sensitive about the risks of speaking for or speaking about someone else, white feminist scholars in the Pacific are faced on the one hand with the acute problems of cross-cultural representation of women. On the other hand there is growing Islander disquiet about misrepresentation and cultural imperialism, disquiet about anthropologists and historians who make their livings and gain academic status at Islanders' expense. It is vital that white feminist scholars consult closely with island women during their field trips, share their findings with them, and invite them to conferences and to contribute to multi-authored volumes. Although such activities are crucial, it is important to recognize they are still only palliative, leaving the power and resources in white women's control.

An area in which white Pacific anthropologists and historians can least controversially contribute to the study of women in the Pacific is in revealing as far as possible the nature of women's lives in early contact times. Disentangling indigenous patterns of gender relations from the models and attitudes introduced by foreign intruders is also a worthy goal. In Polynesia and in much of Melanesia and Micronesia such research must look back at least seventy years, if not much further. Both island and foreign scholars analyzing women's workloads are agreed that these have increased, in some areas most markedly, since contact with the West. Few,

however, recognize that the constraints and demands of domesticity, as defined currently, are largely not indigenous in origin but derive from the influence brought to bear on Islanders' lives by missionaries and other colonial officials. As long as it is believed widely that Pacific women played subordinate, domestic roles in precontact times, any present-day call for a return to traditional ways and values limits the roles women can "legitimately" demand to play. In recent years island politicians and others have vaunted the superior value of things traditional. For island women precontact ways need to be clearly established. Without such knowledge the position and life expectations of women may be influenced heavily by Western-introduced notions of domesticity and the appropriate roles and responsibilities of men and women.

I would like to illustrate this point with a briefly sketched personal anecdote. At the launch, in 1989, of a new Pacific mission journal, I spoke of Polynesian women in precontact societies, outlining their significance in community affairs and the importance of their manufactures, some of which were objects of essential cultural value. I stressed the complementarity between men's and women's roles and responsibilities. Finally, I outlined how I perceived the impact of the church on these women's lives over the past one hundred and more years (Ralston 1990b). The formal response to my paper by a Rotuman woman, who had had a copy of it well in advance and who was at the time undergoing theological training, highlighted the contemporary significance of reconstructions of women's lives in precontact times. Although highly educated, this woman had learned very little about her own cultural and historical past. Empowered by the evidence I had provided, she demanded from both island and foreign church leaders that Pacific women be permitted greater authority within the churches and church life on the basis of indigenous patterns (Fischer 1990).

Many Pacific Island women are aware that their menfolk have imbibed some of the colonizers' attitudes and behavior toward women. The politics of tradition and gender are complex and intertwined, and at least some island women recognize that a call by island men for a return to traditional ways and values will not automatically mean a return to precontact patterns of gender relations. Such calls are not always in women's best interests, a point about which the ni-Vanuatu poet Grace Mera Molisa is trenchantly clear:

“Custom”
misapplied
bastardised
murdered
a frankenstein
corpse
conveniently
recalled
to intimidate
women
(1983, 24)

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The theories and disciplinary techniques brought to the study of women in the Pacific, as elsewhere, are diverse. Faced with an abysmal lack of information about Pacific women, many scholars have been concerned to fill in the gaps. This strongly empiricist approach, known as “contribution history” within women’s history generally, has provided invaluable information about Pacific women’s lives past and present. But the approach has been largely innocent of theory, and at times its practitioners have seemed to believe that the simple focus on women, even from vastly different cultures and historical backgrounds, would have some automatic coherence and academic validity. The title of a book published in 1985, *Women in Asia and the Pacific: Toward an East-West Dialogue* (Goodman 1985), makes my point.

In the early 1970s interest in the status of women as a global issue involved some scholars, none of them Pacific specialists, in rapid forays into a number of Pacific societies, but the data used for these extensive comparative analyses were thin and often unreliable and did little to further understanding of the specificities and varieties of Pacific women’s lives. Since that time scholars dedicated to the understanding of women in Pacific societies have concentrated their attention on individual islands, island groups, or social units, wishing to clarify the unique cultural and historical factors that influenced them. The resulting literature tends to focus on either the symbolic nature of women’s lives or on the materialist or sociological aspects. To date few monograph-length studies of women

or gender have appeared, and not surprisingly, articles can only concentrate on a limited range of aspects.

A central concern of scholars working on the symbolic constructions of Pacific women has been the issue of these women's potency or pollution vis à vis the supernatural realm and the rites Islanders performed to establish efficacious contact with the gods. Early postcontact foreign observers and many later anthropologists and historians interpreted a series of restrictions on women's activities, particularly linked to eating, traveling in canoes, menstruating, and childbearing, as evidence that Pacific women were considered dangerous polluting agents whose presence at certain times or in certain conditions was inimical to the success of societal enterprises because they were abhorrent to the gods. Recent studies informed by extensive literature reviews, and in a number of Melanesian cases by women's own life histories, have resulted in analyses that emphasize the potency of women vis à vis the gods or in vital cultural practices.

Whatever the symbolic valuation of women the question remains: What rights and access did women have in vital religious ceremonies and political decision making? On the one hand, if it is assumed that women in precontact times were conceived as categorically subordinate or polluting, their status vis à vis men was inevitably inferior, and their position in society was thus static and unchanging. On the other hand, if it is maintained that women were potent beings their position was more ambiguous, one that was open to maneuver and contestation. Whatever interpretation prevails, analyses of women that are confined to the symbolic realm leave much of the richness and complexity of women's actual lives unexplained. Further, these symbolic studies tend to concentrate on the ritual or religious sphere and ignore the deep gendered symbolism of many other aspects of island life, for example, production, reproduction, kinship relations, and exchange.

Scholars approaching women's issues from materialist or sociological perspectives consider questions such as the impact on women of Western goods, women's incorporation into the margins of the capitalist system, and the creation of class societies and nation states. They have been concerned particularly about whether the position of Pacific women has declined or improved since contact with the West. The Eurocentric bias and restrictive nature of this focus already have been pointed out. Materialist and sociological scholars also tend to ignore the ritual and symbolic significance inherent in many activities that in the West are conceived of as

exclusively secular. With the exception of Christine Gailey's work on Tonga (1980, 1987a, 1987b), strictly Marxist interpretations have not been prevalent. A widely held theory that the introduction of Christianity benefited all island women, who missionaries believed had led degraded and exploited lives in precontact times, has been closely scrutinized. Scholars have revealed that the impact of the church's patriarchal hierarchies and practices, and its insistence on Western-style domesticity and patterns of mothering, has led to the devaluing of women's lives and contributions and, for many, to a markedly increased workload in more isolated, private situations than previously experienced.

Both theoretical approaches have expanded current knowledge about Pacific Island women. To persist with these two contrasting approaches, however, means that a crucial lacuna in Pacific women's lives remains, namely, that between the prescribed, male-dominated ideologies about women and their essential nature and the *de facto* efficacy women enjoyed in a wide variety of daily activities, including some ritual practices, and the manufacture and exchange of cultural artifacts, many of them highly valued. Bringing the two perspectives together compels consideration of the discrepancies between conceptions of women's symbolic nature and the power they wielded in daily life. Such an integration also allows the construction of a much more comprehensive picture of women's lives. Jocelyn Linnekin's recently published *Sacred Queens and Women of Consequence* (1990) provides a model of such an integrated analysis. She examines both the symbolic and material aspects of Hawaiian women's lives and skillfully reveals the areas of ambiguity and contestation in gender relations in precontact and early postcontact Hawaiian society. It is essential not only to bring symbolic and sociological interpretations to bear on the analysis of Pacific women's lives, but also to investigate the symbolic significance underlying a wide range of daily activities.

IMPACT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Women's studies in the Pacific will be enhanced by the publication of more monographs that combine symbolic and sociological approaches to women's lives. This is not a call just for more data about women. Certainly many lacunae in our knowledge about women's lives still exist, but women's and gender studies are crucial to many major concerns in the contemporary Pacific. Those studying conceptions and constructions of ethnicity

and identity must recognize that these are likely to be gender specific. Closely linked to these debates is the growing interest in and literature about the politics of tradition. Within the volatile debates about tradition (is it authentic, invented, from precontact times or continually evolving?), the importance of different male and female perceptions, lived experience, and aspirations cannot be ignored. Recent rallying calls, particularly from male politicians vaunting the ways and values of tradition, have not always been in Pacific women's best interests, as many of them have recognized.

Scholars of Pacific women's studies also must come to terms with the theoretical debate concerning world-system analysis versus structuralist/culturalist analysis. Although a fine-grained exploration of the structure and history of women's lives is likely to be the initial focus of their work, these scholars must be aware also of the impact of the world system on women's lives in the postcontact period. Again Linnekin has provided a useful model. In *Sacred Queens* she presented a close structural, historical analysis of Hawai'i between precontact times and the 1850s to illuminate the unique position of Hawaiian women over a number of decades in the mid-nineteenth century with regard to land holding and later land ownership. She then located this account in the larger context into which the Hawaiians were incorporated as Western ways penetrated the fabric of their lives.

Few would deny that on a societal level Pacific Islanders have lost out to the political and economic powers of metropolitan countries. Thus, it is important to reveal and analyze the different impacts on Pacific men and women of Western invasions—the changes and tensions each sex experienced. It is also necessary to explore the cultural continuities that have persisted, particularly those in areas of gender relations and kinship transactions. The impact of world economic and political systems cannot be ignored, but that impact varied and in any particular context was not inevitable or predictable. The historical, cultural, and *gender* specificities of each case study must be analyzed if Pacific women's and men's lives are to be understood. As Linnekin claims, the world system and the particular culture or society are always in dynamic interaction (1990, 239); it is important to recognize that that interaction is gendered.

In recent years a growing number of Pacific specialists have recognized the force of the critiques by scholars of women's studies that argued that most past interpretations of Pacific societies ignored the experiences of

women and frequently presented male activities and experience as those of the whole society. Despite the expanding literature on Pacific women, however, books and articles are still published that refuse to recognize the gendered nature of all history and cultural activities. A recent publication on baskets in Polynesia acknowledges the female manufacturers but offers no analysis of the cultural significance of baskets in Polynesia or the gendered politics underlying the persistent refusal of some island and foreign analysts to take the work of women seriously (Arbeit 1990). But women increasingly are being addressed in conference sessions and papers and in publications on the Pacific, both as significant topics in their own right and more slowly as subjects of integral importance in the full range of anthropological and historical debates.

The study of women in the Pacific has opened up new ways of looking at Pacific societies, has asked different questions about them, and, in Pacific history in particular, has provided techniques with which to analyze the lives of ordinary Islanders. Bound to documentary sources, conventional Pacific historians in the past found it very difficult to bring into focus those Islanders (ie, chiefly women and the ordinary people) who rarely caught the attention of literate foreign observers. The methodologies pioneered by women's history in Western societies and by anthropologists have provided Pacific historians with new tools and questions with which to analyze the history of all Islanders, not just a predominantly male elite.

Studying women, men, and gender relations highlights the cultural ambiguities and tensions alive in any society and offers another voice, another perspective on Pacific societies that previously had been represented largely by univocal, unequivocal interpretations. Women's studies have proved an important means of deconstructing past orthodoxies. Claims have surfaced recently that a new gender orthodoxy is being insisted on. New ideas, theories, and methodologies are intellectually exciting and seductive, and scholars convinced of the explanatory superiority of new approaches can become intolerant of other interpretations. Personally, I do not perceive a refusal among scholars of women's studies to listen and respond to others' ideas. Rather, there is a strong sense of intellectual discovery, of a world hardly explored, in which any new interpretation or methodology may prove insightful. I hope that we can resist the allure of premature new orthodoxies, of any orthodoxies, and that we will always be open to new evidence and points of view.

THIS DIALOGUE purports to be about women in the Pacific, but as a Polynesianist I am very aware of the Polynesian bias in examples and perhaps in interpretations that appear. My debt to the work of Jocelyn Linnekin is obvious, but I would like also to thank her for her generous help and collegiality while she was at Macquarie University (1990–1991). Once again Margaret Jolly offered invaluable commentaries and suggestions. My thanks also to San Maccoll for her comments on this paper.

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